

INITIAL STATEMENT OF REASONS

Habitat Conservation Fund Program

WILDLIFE AREA ACTIVITIES APPLICATION GUIDE

California Fish and Game Code, Sections 2720 through 2729, and Sections 2780, 2781, and 2785-2799.6

California Government Code Sections 7550 through 7550.6

California Public Resources Code, Sections 5900 through 5903, Section 5910, Section 5917 and 5919, Section 5929, Section 31011, Section 33216, and Division 23, commencing with Section 33000

Tobacco Tax and Health Protection Act of 1988

SPECIFIC PURPOSE OF THE REGULATION

The purpose of the proposed regulation is to implement, interpret, and make specific California Fish and Game (DFG) Code, Sections 2720 through 2729, and Sections 2780, 2781, and 2785 – 2799.6. Specifically, it will establish California Department of Parks and Recreation (Department)'s eligibility, application, grant selection and grant administration requirements for the Habitat Conservation Fund (HCF) Program.

NECESSITY

The HCF Program allocates approximately \$2 million per year to the Department to provide grants to local entities to protect fish, wildlife, and native plant resources, to acquire or develop wildlife corridors and trails, and to provide for nature interpretation programs and other programs which bring urban residents into park and wildlife areas. The California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990, Fish and Game Code, Chapter 9, commencing with Section 2799.5 requires that "reasonable public access to lands...be provided except where direct access may interfere with habitat protection". The Wildlife Protection Act also defines eligible applicants, match rate, eligible project categories, and the funding distribution between local government and state agencies.

The Department initiated an extensive public review and comment process of the Habitat Conservation Fund Program Procedural Guide, Revised May 2007. This process included in-person public focus groups held in Northern and Southern California. The Department completed a 30-day public comment period in the winter of 2007 to allow the public to comment on the proposed amendment to the existing regulations.

To further assist applicants, the Department separated the May 2007 procedural guide into eight individual guides. Seven application guides represent each of the seven funding categories. The eighth guide serves as the HCF Grant Administration Guide.

The following information is based on the HCF Wildlife Area Activities Guide Draft dated March 31, 2010. This draft incorporates comments from wildlife and outdoor recreation specialists obtained during six focus group meetings held throughout California. Additionally, the Department incorporated feedback obtained from potential applicants during six public technical assistance workshops.

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HABITAT CONSERVATION FUND PROGRAM (HCF) DESCRIPTION – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Competitive Program Intent

The Department developed this section to summarize the intent of the Habitat Conservation Fund Program, cite the original State law, (from which the program originated), and provide general information about program funding mechanisms.

The information in this section is based on State law (California Fish and Game Code, Sections 2720 through 2729, and Sections 2780, 2781, and 2785-2799.6). The Department relays the program information in one uniform manner to potential applicants.

Annual Allocation

This section states the exact allocation to the Department each fiscal year, based on State law.

Application Filing Deadline

This section provides for an annual due date for local agencies applying for HCF funds. The Department established this deadline to notify applicants when applications are due.

Grant Performance Period

This section explains the grant performance period and clarifies when costs can be incurred to qualify for reimbursement. The applicant, upon award, will have a 5-year time frame for all projects selected for funding, which begins upon appropriation in the Budget Act on July 1 of each year.

Maximum and Minimum Grant Request Amounts

This section clarifies the recommended amount that applicants should request. However, there are no maximum or minimum grant amounts provided for in State Law.

Required Match

This section states the State law required dollar-for-dollar match of the total project costs.

Project Categories

This section states that seven different eligible project categories are available with separate application guides. All categories are eligible for funding each fiscal year.

Eligible Applicants

This Section clarifies which types of entities are eligible to request HCF grant funding, based on State law.

Eligible Projects

This section clarifies the types of projects eligible for HCF funding, based on State guidance. Based on the Department's administrative experience, this section assists the applicant to make an informed decision on whether to propose a project for funding.

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HABITAT CONSERVATION FUND PROGRAM – WILDLIFE AREA ACTIVITIES INFORMATION

Ineligible Projects

This section clarifies the types of projects that are not eligible for HCF funding, based on State guidance.

HCF Program Process

The flow chart clarifies the HCF Grant process and projected timeline of the project submittal, approval, and award process. All awarded projects must start within one year of the appropriation date and must be completed within 5 years of that same date.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Instructions for Submitting the Application Packet

This section provides preliminary instructions for preparing an application packet. The guidance in this section was created in response to frequently asked questions from focus group, public hearing, and technical assistance workshop participants. The explanation outlining the application deadline, letters of support and the number of copies to submit and specific format ensures that applicants have an understanding of how to submit information for consideration of funding. The Department established this section to provide consistency and normalization for the information requested by all applicants. An Application Checklist is provided for the applicants' benefit.

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Application Packet Requirement, Checklist and Discussion

The following discusses the need and origination of each item required in the Application packet. If an item is not applicable to the project, the applicant shall respond with "N/A" (not applicable) with an explanation as to why.

Application Form

The Department requires this form to identify who the applicant is (eligibility), where the proposed project is located, and how much funding is requested. State law requires applicants to demonstrate ownership of property; the application form enables the Department to verify this requirement.

Authorizing Resolution

The authorizing resolution enables the applicant's governing body to certify that it has approved the submittal of an application for the project, and establishes an authorized representative to act on behalf of the applicant during the grant process. The provisions contained in the resolution originate from State law. The resolution form provides the means to ensure that the applicant has reviewed the grant application and grant contract and agrees to the language contained within both documents. A sample form is provided.

Grant Scope/Cost Estimate Form and Match Instructions

This section provides the applicant information and guidance regarding the following items: establishing a grant scope, developing a concept-level cost estimate and providing required match information. The applicant needs to properly identify expected grant deliverables for reimbursements and project completion. The grant scope/cost estimate form enables the Department to evaluate how the grant funds and match are proposed to be spent and if the proposed costs are eligible. In addition, the grant scope/cost estimate form enables the Department to determine if the match sources are eligible and sufficient funds are available to complete the project. The grant scope/cost estimate form provides a means for the applicant to identify the total project costs and the percentage of costs dedicated to non-capital outlay costs, such as interpretive or educational programs. The Match Requirement sections provide instruction regarding eligible and ineligible match sources, rules regarding match and the method for calculating the grant amount and match amount based on the total project cost.

Activity Site Assurances

The State requires the applicant to have ownership of the property to conduct wildlife area activity events, or to provide assurance that the applicant/grantee has the authority to conduct and operate the proposed project events for public outdoor recreation use. Activity site assurances must be in effect for the length of the project performance period, or the time by which the entire grant funds have been expended and the project is complete, whichever is earlier.

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California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

This section explains what the applicant must provide in order to demonstrate that the project complies with CEQA. CEQA is a project requirement based on State law. The CEQA Certification Form provided certifies that the lead agency has determined that it has complied with CEQA for the proposed project. The Department provides a copy of the form for applicant use.

Project Completion Schedule

The Department requires the applicant to provide a document with key milestones for the proposed project. This document assists the department in determining the viability of the proposed project and if the applicant can complete all the expected deliverables within the grant's time constraints.

Project Location Map

This map provides visual information about the surrounding project site area for evaluation purposes, and enables the Department to locate the property for the purpose of site inspections.

Project Summary

The Department developed the project summary application item as a result of potential applicant feedback expressed during the focus group process. Applicants requested a means to explain the overall vision for the project and the project's merits. While not scored, the Department requires a project summary to conduct a more thorough comparative analysis of all project application packages submitted.

Project Proposal

The explanation outlining the limit of the combined criteria responses to 15 pages, 8 ½" x 11" paper, single-sided, double-spaced, with 12-point font ensures that applicants have a consistent understanding of how much information they can provide when responding. The Department established this page limit in order to equalize the volume of content provided by all applicants.

Leases or Agreements

The Department requires applicants to list other leases and agreements pertinent to the project so that application reviewer(s) can determine if any such agreements might jeopardize the project.

Photos of the Project Site

This requirement provides visuals of the project site to give the application reviewer(s) a photographic means in which to become familiar with the proposed project site(s) before work has begun.

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PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA

Project Proposal Instructions

The project proposal instructions provide assistance in responding to the scoring criteria, which serves as an assessment tool. An explanation is provided outlining the limit of the combined criteria responses to 15 pages, 8 ½" x 11" paper, single-sided, double-spaced, with 12-point font, which ensures that applicants have a consistent understanding of how much information they can provide when responding. The Department established this page limit in order to equalize the volume of content provided by all applicants.

Scoring Rubric – Ranking Point System:

The project proposal scoring serves as an assessment tool, which enables the Department to assess the project's adherence to the grant requirements, in addition to the project's merits, as explained through the applicant's responses to the criteria. These assessments, with scores assigned to the criteria, enable the Department to rank projects and determine recommendations for funding.

These criteria were developed in accordance with California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990, Fish and Game Code Chapter 9. The wording of the criteria and the specific point value of each of these criteria reflect input gathered through public meetings and habitat specialist interviews.

Specifically, the Department developed the HCF scoring system through focus group and public hearing participant feedback and Department of Fish and Game input. Focus group feedback confirmed the Department's understanding that a total of 100 points (for all of the criteria collectively) is a common and suitable standard for competitive grant program scoring totals.

The breakdown in the 100 point scoring system reflects the emphasis provided by State law, Department expertise, State Wildlife Biologists, and the public input process. Criteria that contain greater point values reflect the higher priorities based on State law, Department expertise, State Fish and Game Biologists, and public input. Criteria that contain fewer point values reflect the lower priorities based on federal and State law, Department expertise, State Fish and Game Biologists, and the public input process.

The following explains the point breakdown balance in the scoring system.

15 Points: The Department established 15 points for the highest valued elements desired and required for the proposed project. These 15 point criteria have the highest value because they represent the core elements of the wildlife area activities proposal: need for the wildlife activity project and the applicant capacity (applicant's readiness to provide for all aspects of an integrated project management process).

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10 Points: The Department established 10 points for the second highest valued elements desired and required for the proposed project. These criteria have the second highest value because they represent secondary core elements for the wildlife area activities proposal: site access, stakeholders involvement (in planning and developing the project), project description, site locations and activities, partnership opportunities, pre-activity knowledge evaluation (measures applicants' educational experience) and post-activity knowledge evaluation (participants' retained knowledge and experiences during the experience).

Project Proposal

Introduction

This section allows the Department to evaluate competing grant applications. Also, this section provides a reminder to all potential applicants that all projects are competing for approximately \$2 million dollars available annually and there are a total of 100 points possible for each application. An overview is provided to show the distribution of points.

Criteria #1 – Need (15 points)

Criteria #2 – Site Access (10 points)

Criteria #3 – Stakeholders (10 points)

Criteria #4 – Applicant Capacity (15 points)

Criteria #5 – Project Description (10 points)

Criteria #6 – Site Locations and Activities (10 points)

Criteria #7 – Partnership Opportunities (10 points)

Criteria #8 – Pre-Activity Knowledge Evaluation (10 points)

Criteria #9 – Post-Activity Knowledge Evaluation (10 points)

Criterion #1-Need: This criterion is weighted 15 points as a core element of the wildlife area activities proposal because the HCF program core purpose is to fund projects where a significant need for wildlife area activities projects exists. Applicants must describe the existing need for wildlife area activities experiences and why people in the community will not have the opportunity to experience wildlife area activities if the project is not funded. Applicants must address the deficiency of existing opportunities for urban residents traveling to the wildlife areas.

Criterion # 2 – Site Access: This criterion originates from the HCF Program legislation, which requires that the public should have access to the project sites except when that access may interfere with habitat protection. This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core wildlife area activities element because it encourages the applicant to consider wildlife activities projects that provide either direct or secondary access (such as mass transportation, bike lanes, or trails). The applicant is required to describe its plans for future access that will occur after project completion.

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Criteria #3 – Stakeholders: This criterion provides the opportunity for the applicant to show its efforts to involve the broadest representation of stakeholders, potential users, public agency partners, and non-profit partners in the project planning and implementation process. This criterion enables the Department to assess the applicant's public involvement efforts. This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core element that contributes to the merits of the project proposal because it enables the Department to evaluate the applicant's inclusion of the public in aspects of the project.

Criteria #4 – Applicant Capacity: This criterion discusses the applicant's readiness to provide for an integrated project management process, including project planning and monitoring. In addition to the information provided in this criterion, the Department will consider the applicant's performance history with grants management as part of the project selection process. This criterion is weighted 15 points as a core wildlife area activities element, because it enables the Department to evaluate the applicant's project management abilities, including assimilating program improvement ideas and incorporating those ideas into future wildlife area activities offerings.

Criteria #5 – Project Description: This criterion enables the applicant to describe the proposed project goals and objectives, the targeted audience for these programs, and how it will educate the project participants. This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core wildlife activities element, because it enables the Department to evaluate the applicant's explanation of the long-term community impact of the proposed project.

Criteria #6 – Project Site Locations and Activities: This criterion enables the applicant to describe the proposed wildlife area location(s) where the wildlife area activities project will be conducted, and the activities the participants will experience. This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core wildlife area activities element, because it enables the Department to evaluate the applicant's ability to provide a number of locations, identify the specific site locations, and provide justification for the proposed site(s) and activities and locations selected.

Criteria #7 – Partnership Opportunities: This criterion enables the applicant to describe how it will partner with other agencies (e.g., state, federal, or regional parks, non-profit organizations, business groups, etc.) if applicable. This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core wildlife area activities element because it encourages the applicant to consider working with partner(s), which can provide assistance in knowledge of the wildlife areas, funding support, and the potential to contribute to the project's longevity.

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Criteria #8 – Pre-Activity Knowledge Evaluation: This criterion enables the applicant to describe the pre-trip process used to measure the participant's knowledge prior to participating in the project. The criterion addresses four areas of knowledge critical to project success. These knowledge areas also align with HCF program intent. This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core wildlife area activities element because it will allow the applicant to evaluate and document the participant's level of knowledge of each of the wildlife areas visited and their comfort level with the proposed activities.

Criteria #9 – Post-Activity Knowledge Evaluation: This criterion enables the applicant to describe the post-trip follow-up process used to measure the project's effectiveness (determine the extent to which the project's goals and objectives were achieved, and the extent to which the project's participants retained the knowledge and experiences gained during the experience). This criterion is weighted 10 points as a secondary core wildlife activities element because it encourages the applicant to evaluate and document both the wildlife activities' short-term and long-term effectiveness.

Eligible Costs

Eligible Costs Charts

This section provides clarity and guidance about how the grant funds and the required match may be spent. The section provides rules and examples of pre-activity and activity costs. There is also a chart on ineligible costs that cannot be charged to the grant. Due to years of experience with project administration and extensive public input, the Department determined that non-construction costs capped at 25% of the grant amount provide an appropriate balance between the public's interest in gaining benefit from capital projects and the grantee's ability to complete capital projects which encompass non-construction costs. This cap reflects the Department's desire to ensure that the grantee incorporates the majority of the grant funds into the capital portion of the project. At the same time, the Department understands that pre-activity costs are an integral part of non-capital outlay projects.

DEFINITIONS

The definitions section provides the meanings of capitalized words and terms found in the Wildlife Area Activities Application Guide. These meanings are necessary to ensure consistent understanding of the HCF Wildlife Area Activities program and grant administration terms. The words and definitions found in this section originate from federal or State laws.